

CAUTION

Humbly Offer'd

A B O O T

Passing the Bill against *Blasphemy*.

THE *Caution* requisite in the Consideration of the Bill against *Blasphemy*, is this, that the Word may be so well Distinguish'd and Explained, that it may not prove, in Practice, a greater Snare and Suffering to Good Men, than a Restraint upon Ill Ones. For if it be left *Ambiguous*, so that it may Affect *Religious*, as well as Lewd and Wicked People, it will, like the *Trojan Horse*, carry an Army in the Belly of it, to serve the Spleen or Pride of every Party, in their turn of Government, to Oppress the Rest.

Charity forbids me to think the Gentlemen, whose Zeal is Employ'd to Promote the Success of this Bill, have any such unfair Latitudes in their Design; and therefore I shall First say, *What Blasphemy is in it self*. Secondly, *How Blasphemy is Cognoscible to the Civil Authority*, and how far It may fall within Its Province to Consider and Suppress.

Blasphemy then, in it self, is certainly, a *Speaking Evilly of God*: But what that Evil Speaking is, and how to Distinguish and Explain it, to the Magistrates Purpose, will be the Narrow and Pinch of the Question.

I Grant, a Man that shall Seriously Profess some Erroneous Opinion concerning God, upon a weak Judgment, or a mistaken Education, that Contradicts the Express Text of Holy Scripture, may be said to hold a *Blasphemous* Opinion, just as such may be said to take God's Name in vain, that Pray to Him, and yet *hate to be Reformed* by Him: And as God Charges *Blasphemy* on them *that say they are Jews, and are not, but of the Synagogue of Satan*: Which, whether it was Error or Hypocrisie, It does not appear to be of such a Nature as is Punishable by the Civil Magistrate. I therefore Distinguish and Say, That *Blasphemy*, as it falls under the Notice of Civil Power, is not an Humble and Serious Mistake of the Text, but a *Presumptuous and Despitful Expression, or Opinion about the Nature and Being of God*: An *Irreligious and Scornful Treating of the Divine Majesty in his Nature and Attributes*; and not an Incongruous Speculation, or Erroneous Notion from an Unsound Judgment, or a Misguided Conscience. For what is true of an *Heretick*, and is his *Characteristick*, is also true of a *Blasphemer*; that is, not a Mistaken, but a *Guilty* Man: Not a Conscientious, but an *Irreligious* Person: One that is *Condemned in himself*, who *Dares* the Divinity, and Proudly Acts against Knowledge, and so, Conscious to himself of his own Evil and Error.

Thus the Apostle to *Titus*; *A Man that is an Heretick, after the first and second Admonition, Reject; Knowing that he that is such, is Subverted and Sinneth, being Condemned of himself*. And such a Self-condemned Sinner is the *Blasphemer* proper for the Magistrates Cognizance.

Not Considering well of this one word *Heretick*, in the Apostles sence, *viz.* One *Self-Condemed, or Condemned of Himself*, has fill'd the World with *Blood and Misery* through many Generations. Whereas had St. Paul's Definition and Direction been understood and follow'd, Mistaken Men had been Pittied and Informed, and not Persecuted and Killed for Gods sake; while the Impious Contemners and Blasphemers

mers of God and Religion had met with their Deserts from the Civil Magistrates.

But I will readily confess, that a Person never so Serious in his Mistake concerning God, may very well be Disowned by the Church he is a Member of, because the contrary Sentiment might be one of the Terms of Communion, and no Wrong done; But Therefore, to say, **Take him Soaler**, though otherwise a Vertuous, Peaceable and Charitable Man, is a Method, not to be Justified by True Christianity; especially when that which is required to be Believed, is the **Comment**, and not the *Text*, which alone should be *Sacred* and *Controuling* in point of Doctrine among Christians. And to say True, 'twould be too hard a Task, to defend the *Imposition* of a Doctrine, not delivered in the Terms of Scripture, which is the Great *Creed* of Christians, when the Party to Believe does not refuse to give his Faith in the Terms thereof: For after all, Truth loses no Ground by fair Concessions, and I know not how we can well deny that *Comments* are a sort of Begging of the Question, which have not a Voice from Heaven to Confirm them.

I perceive the Bill is Fram'd in favour of the *Christian Religion*, and of the *Trinity*, as a main Pillar of it. But after all, I believe our *Good Lives* will best Recommend and Maintain It. *Framing* of *Creeds* hath cost former Ages so very Dear, by the Distraction of Churches, and the Destruction of People, that it were great pitty fresh occasions should be given to Revive a Controversie so well laid.

This Quarrel alone, had so besmeared the Face of Christianity with Blood, in the first Ages of the Church, that it lost to Christians that Reverence with the *Gentiles*, their Piety and Charity had before rais'd to themselves, and their Profession: And whatever we may think, nothing else can *Repair our Breaches*, and *Restore to us Paths to Dwell in*.

There are several sorts of Creeds, I know, as the Athanasian, Nicean, Sabellian, and in short the Real and Nominal Trinitarians. But since none can be so orthodox as that deliver'd to us in *Gods Book*, why should we press the point further? Who can Determine with equal Authority to that of the *Holy Ghost*? Who can express His mind Apter? Or how can we frame a better *General* to Center In? At least to maintain Charity by, If our sentiments of the Intention of the Text are not the same? I speak this with great respect to the secular Authority. For it is certain, that the several Churches, or Religious Societies that may hold these several Modes of Trinity, have that Power over their own Members, by the Common Rules of Fellowship, that as to such Points as are the Terms of Communion, They may Respectively deal with any of them that may forsake their usual Belief; so far as refusing them any further Communion. But for the Civil Authority, *at this time of Day*, to Interpose, and *Penally* Impose any one of them, unless it were the sacred Text (to which all Parties Refer and Submit) looks something hard: And when we consider the *Divided* State of the Nation, the *Learning* and *Freedom* of Spirit that is now among the *People*, and the *Liberty of Conscience* they are in the Possession of, I must acknowledge, I cannot see the Prudence of it. But to make Property a Sacrifice for mistakes about Religion, if yet it be a mistake; and to make it So by the vote of Civil Authority, that indeed may Conclude but not Convince, (for that pretends not to an Infallible Spirit of Decision, as to Truth and Error) has certainly a Difficulty in it not easily overcome: Since to me it seems to shake those Fundamental Laws by which Property is Declared and Defended. For it is hard to apprehend how Faith is the Foundation of Property.

Nor is this all; for if this Bill Pass, to pick a hole in the Coat of any one Party this time, the rest may say, that perhaps lye open to be hitt upon other Points, what know

we but that it will *be our Turn* next time; and tho' as to this Doctrine we are within the Pale and Safe, yet upon other Articles we may at another time be equally exposed; and so that which cannot be done at once, may, in the same manner, by little and little, be accomplished at last, to the Prejudice of every Interest that Dissents from that which is uppermost? I mean, a forced Uniformity in Worship, Doctrine and Discipline. Certainly Presidents in so Nice a Case must be very dangerous, and every Party being concern'd in every Party's Security, it is obliged, by its own safety, to endeavour the safety of the Rest, tho', as to the Point on Foot, They Differ'd as much from the Party in Question, as that which holds the Chair.

I confess this Consideration moves much with me; and if there be any ground for it, then certainly there can be no Good One now, for a Bill against *Blasphemy*, without great Caution and Distinction in the wording of it; lest Virtue suffer more than Vice, and Dissent rather than Impiety.

I have been the Freer in this matter, being neither *Deist* nor *Socinian*; and have no other Exception to the Bill, than that which I have Express'd: For I fear it will be an Occasion of Animosity, if not of *Persecution*: And as it has more than once happened, that part which Affects the *Conscientious* shall be more Vigorously Executed, than that which Regards the Irreligious Blasphemer. For it has been Observed, during the Reign of *King Charles* the Second, that the Dissenters Suffered more in *One Year* that the Laws were put in Execution, for their Religious Meetings, than the *Impious* and *Debauched* did in his *Whole Reign*: So much more Inclined were some Men to *Wink* at *Wickedness* than Indure a Conscientious Dissent: Of which the *Ecclesiastical Courts* were but too great an Instance, as well as the Ordinary Sessions of Justice

To Conclude, but with all Submission and Respect to Authority, I say again, to make a *Culpable* and *Punishable* Blasphemy, there must be an *Irreligious* and *Despightful* Intention and Design in the words of the Person Accused.

And here I conceive the Civil Magistrate has the full and free use and exercise of his Authority against Blasphemy: For Blasphemy, in this Sence, *Corrupts Good Manners*, being a plain and Impudent Indignity and Affront upon the most High Good ~~and~~ God; and merits not only Law, but the warmest Zeal to suppress It: For to endure it, as it hath been, God knows, too long and too much already, is the high way to Provoke God to *vindicate* his own Glory and Sovereignty at the cost of the whole Nation; wherein the Innocent may happen to suffer with the Guilty, tho' to these a *Judgment*, and to them but an Affliction.

It is to be Lamented, as well as aborr'd, that a People of so much Light and Knowledge, and under such pretences to *Reformation*, should want Zeal to their Power, to Root out such Scandalous and Impious Practices from among us. There are good Laws, if they were but Employed to discourage such Irreligious Persons, let their Quality be what it will. Law knows *No Respect of Persons*, Tho' it too often happens that many Cloathed with Authority Do, that have the Power and are sworn to Suppress them.

And indeed, as the case stands, If we are in earnest to suppress *Blasphemy*, *Prophaness* and *Debauchery*, There seems to be but two ways in the Power of the Civil Magistrates; but they are good ones, and might be in great measure effectual.

First, to suppress all *Play-Houses*, and *Gameing-Houses*, and Places of *Looseness* and *Debauchery*, those Seminaries or Nurseries of Impiety: That have palpably *Relax'd* the Ancient Discipline of the Nation, and corrupted the Youth of it, to the Ruin of the *Honour*, *Virtue* and *Fortune*, of many Ancient and Worthy Families: And which therefore are the *Scandal* and *Aversion* of the Sober Men of every Perswasion.

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The next way to Extinguish Vice, is to make a Vicious Man *Uncapable* of being a *Magistrate*; who, being conscious of his own Ills, will but *faintly* Punish other Men's, and whose Power will *Awe* others from Informing against him. If Publick Employments and Marks of Favour were made the *Rewards* of *Virtue* and *Ability*, where-ever they are found, we should quickly see an Alteration among the Gentry of *England*, and by their Power and Example, a Reformation among the Common People. And to say true, If *Virtue*, and not *Opinion*, were the *Test*, *England* would have the Use and Service of the Sobriety and Good *Sence* of all Her People, *for the Suppression of Vice*, and *Introducing of a General Reformation of Manners*: Which God Almighty send.

THE END.